



Mental Health Matters: Protect & Destress

By Kaley Ciluffo

With the COVID-19 pandemic and navigating many other persistent challenges of our world, mental health has become an issue of concern and a topic of discussion for students. In 2019, more than 1 in 3 high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness—a 40% increase since 2009. While many explanations exist for this increase, it's imperative that we vocalize the challenges, stressors, and demands that students face so we can work to resolve them. This attention becomes more important as many students enroll on college campuses, leaving behind their communities, support groups, and homes. The adjustment period for college freshmen is critical to building a solid foundation for a successful four years. Below, we discuss what actions college students can take to destress and protect their mental wellness.

Understand Mental Health

The first step toward fixing anything is understanding it. Mental health consists of the brain's basic chemistry. If this chemistry is interrupted or goes astray, it can impact your emotions and actions. Think of it like cancer. If your body's DNA and cells become mutated incorrectly, your body produces a negative response in the form of cancer. Your brain works similarly. Too much or too little of a chemical can cause things to go astray. Genetics and exposure to traumatic events can also lead to mental illness.

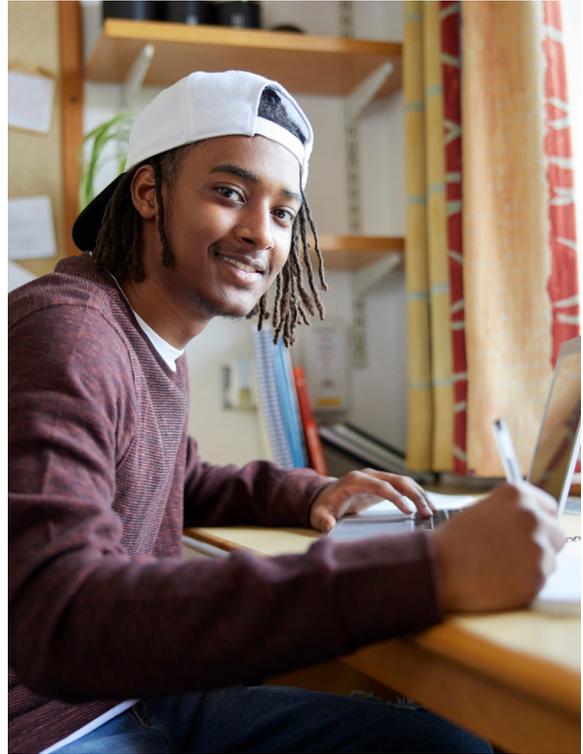
It's important to remember that you do not need a diagnosable mental illness to experience poor mental health. Chronic stress or uniquely high-stakes times, like applying for college, can also instigate or create poor mental health outcomes. Though you may not have a mental illness, that doesn't mean your brain won't require maintenance or care at some point in your life. Some symptoms that something may be off are changes in your normal behaviors. Are you

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a social person suddenly isolating and missing social events? Is your sleep schedule thrown off by something you can't pinpoint? Changes in behaviors or patterns could indicate that you need a mental health intervention.

Find a Distraction

When combatting stressful situations or outcomes, find something to busy your mind. This, however, does not mean avoiding the task at hand. Let's say you have a huge test coming up, or you're working to meet an application deadline—preparation is key to finding success. However, once you've prepared adequately (over-preparing is just as harmful as under preparing) find outlets where your mind can decompress. Give yourself permission to take some downtime and relax by doing things you enjoy. This will help you clear your mind and approach any stressful situation with more clarity and intention.



Plan Ahead

Acute stress and overwhelm can emerge when we are at a loss for time. Perhaps it feels like you have twenty things that need completion at once. Write each thing down and determine what needs the most attention and what needs the least attention. Sort the tasks into time blocks too. What will take the most time and the least. Understanding your workload at a more nuanced level can help mitigate the overwhelm you might feel and help you focus. Also, prioritizing your work throughout the semester and keeping track of your commitments helps to lessen the likelihood of any surprises or jam-packed weeks. Something that students may not think to do is schedule rest deliberately. By building rest into your schedule, you prioritize yourself and your physical and mental well-being.

Avoid Bad Habits

Maintaining a schedule and healthy habits plays a critical role in maintaining positive mental health. Through everyone's schedules may differ, regulating sleeping and eating patterns will help your brain stay healthy. It's also important to surround yourself with a community of people that can hold you accountable. Little things, like adequate hydration and not skipping meals for work, can and do make a difference in your optimal function. Most importantly, if something is bothering you—share it with someone or find a healthy way to release it. Even if it seems small or trivial, little things can manifest into bigger problems.

How we manage our mental health and stress, particularly during our years at University, plays a significant role in students' ability to maximize their experience. University years are formative, and poor mental health while juggling numerous demands and the transition into adulthood can create an experience that students would like to forget instead of becoming one that students look back on happily.